

The White House

Operation Preservation

The White House. The very mention of it stirs our emotions—bringing to the surface our feelings about the United States of America. At any given moment, this icon of our democratic way of life is serving many different roles at the same time. It is first and foremost the home of the president of the United States. It is also the office of the president, active with the business of governing. It is a stage for world events, serving as the location for many functions of state and diplomatic endeavors. It is also an incomparable museum where objects and furnishings tell the stories in our nation's history. It is a place people bring their children—a place to connect to what our country is all about.

The White House is located in the urban monumental core of the District of Columbia, surrounded by park lands, known as President's Park. The park is composed of Lafayette Park on the north, Sherman Park to the southeast, First Division Monument to the southwest, and the broad expanse of the Ellipse on the south. Along with the White House grounds, these areas and vistas form some of the most compelling cultural landscapes in the nation.

There are many agencies that work together to make operations at the White House function effectively. It is a team effort where organizational turf lines fall away in the face of serving the presidency. The agencies are confronted today with operational problems that have developed over many years. The problems include: deliveries pouring through every entrance; no separate circulation system for staff and

materials; little on-site storage space; parked vehicles littering the historic landscapes; inadequate meeting space with poor acoustics; no informal indoor recreation space for first families; almost primitive conditions for the White House press corps; people on the White House tour forced to wait in lines outside in the heat and cold; visitors moving through rooms in the White House without knowing how objects and events connect to every twist and turn of our nation's history. These concerns brought various agencies together in 1992 for eight years of work to develop a *Comprehensive Design Plan for the White House and President's Park*.

Both the White House and President's Park are units of the national park system and the National Park Service was the lead agency for this planning effort. As a first step, a project executive committee was formed. This committee was chaired by the director of the National Park Service. Members included the leaders of 12 agencies with stewardship or oversight missions at the White House (see box p. 20). The executive committee confirmed that the goals of the plan were to preserve the historic buildings, vistas, and landscapes while providing for the needs of the presidency in the 21st century. The U.S.

Illustration by
Wayne
Parmenter.



Capitol has such a plan, developed by the Architect of the Capitol in 1981. However, for the first time in its 200-year history, there would be a comprehensive plan for the site of the executive branch.

Planning began with a series of workshops to encourage a public dialogue about the problems and opportunities facing the site. Work continued with the development of “desired futures” describing what the site should be like in the future. Those officials with long experience at the White House joined experts from a variety of fields to explore how this historic site could operate effectively and at the same time be preserved for the future. Among others, the discussions involved the public, transportation and special event planners, the historic preservation community, educators, security experts, representatives of neighboring businesses and organizations, the White House press corps, tourism officials, historians, architects, urban planners, and landscape architects.

Alternatives were shaped and shared with the public for reactions in 1995. A draft plan was developed and released for public review in 1998; a final plan followed in 1999 with the final plan approvals coming in the spring of 2000. The *Comprehensive Design Plan* has the required approvals of the Commission of Fine Arts and the National Capital Planning Commission, both of which have legislated review responsibilities for federal projects within the capital city.

Along with the plan, a 500-page environmental impact statement was prepared to display all the alternatives considered and the impacts

that would result from the proposed plan and the alternatives. Three other management tools resulted from the planning effort: design guidelines developed by site agencies and experts from the private sector; an administrative history prepared by Dr. William Patrick O’Brien; and a cultural landscape report, revised by Dr. Susan Calafate Boyle.

Today, there is someone among us who will be president of the United States 20 years from now. When that individual takes office, if the projects in the *Comprehensive Design Plan* are implemented they will have preserved the historic buildings, vistas, and landscapes found here, while providing the infrastructure and services needed for the modern presidency. And people will take their tour of the White House with a deeper understanding of the meaning of this “people’s house.”

Projects in the *Comprehensive Design Plan* will be implemented over 20 years with an investment of \$300 million. Both public and private funding may be involved, as there is opportunity here for the kind of quiet philanthropy that has benefited the White House and its environs in the past.

Over the 20 years, the major actions of the *Comprehensive Design Plan* will:

- Preserve the historic buildings and landscapes by placing new facilities below ground or in existing structures.
- Reclaim the historic landscape from the rows of parked vehicles by providing below ground parking in two facilities – one beneath Pennsylvania Avenue and one beneath the Ellipse.
- Provide a delivery and site circulation system using the existing loading docks at the New Executive Office Building and underground corridors to move goods and materials throughout the complex.
- Provide below ground storage space for the massive number of items now stored off-site and repeatedly moved to and from the site for special events and official functions.
- Build below ground flexible meeting space and adequate news media facilities. The latter would, for the first time, provide space for out-of-town and foreign journalists who now spill over into hallways and outdoor service drives at the site.

People from across the nation contributed to the Comprehensive Design Plan for the White House and President’s Park. In addition, the following members of the project’s Executive Committee helped to guide the development of this plan.

Advisory Council on Historic Preservation
 Commission of Fine Arts
 District of Columbia
 Executive Office of the President
 Executive Residence at the White House
 General Services Administration
 National Capital Planning Commission
 National Park Service
 Pennsylvania Avenue Development Corp. (until 4/96)
 U.S. Department of the Treasury
 U.S. Secret Service
 White House Military Office

- Install new utility systems throughout the grounds with capacity for growth and easy maintenance access.
- Create a lively visitor education center that expands the existing rather static White House Visitor Center exhibits into the exciting learning experience visitors say they want when they come to the White House.
- Give future first families who live in the formal White House an indoor, informal recreation space in a nearby below ground location.
- Create a site character around the White House that represents the highest quality landscape and urban park land.

The project moves now from planning to implementation—from vision to reality—from “we wish” to “we must.” Serving the presidency and the people at the same time is a privilege not often offered. It is important to both that actions now follow the path set forth.

As Eleanor Roosevelt noted, “[History] clearly shows that we arrive at catastrophe by failing to meet situations—by failing to act where

we should act [The] opportunity passes and the next situation always is more difficult than the last one.”

James I. McDaniel has served as Director of White House Liaison for the National Park Service since 1984, providing visitor services, resource management, maintenance, planning, design, and construction for the White House and surrounding President's Park.

Ann Bowman Smith is the Assistant Director for Project Development, White House Liaison. She has served as project coordinator for the Comprehensive Design Plan for the White House since its inception. She joined the National Park Service in 1967.

For more information, a summary of the *Comprehensive Design Plan* for the White House and President's Park is available from: Office of White House Liaison, National Park Service, 1100 Ohio Drive, S.W., Washington, DC 20242; Phone: 202-619-6344 and 800-292-0832; email: <White_House_Liaison@nps.gov>

Lisa Kolakowsky Smith

National Historic Landmark Stewards Association

Until recently, no group existed to promote the needs of National Historic Landmarks (NHLs), our nation's most highly recognized treasures. Organizations exist to preserve Civil War Battlefields, barns, the choreography of dance and the history of film, but none to preserve NHLs. In November 2000, a group of owners and managers of National Historic Landmarks met in Philadelphia for the first official board meeting of the National Historic Landmark Stewards Association (NHLSA.) The mission of the NHLSA is to preserve, promote, and protect NHLs throughout our nation.

Of course, this national organization did not begin on that November day in Philadelphia. To tell the whole story, we must go back three years, to the National Historic Landmark

Stewards Congress in West Point, New York. It was in November 1997 that NHL Stewards (owners and managers of these irreplaceable sites) joined together for the first time on a regional basis to discuss their needs and possible solutions to their common problems. Over 100 stewards attended, representing NHLs in four distinct if often overlapping categories: private homes, institutional sites, interpreted historic sites and historic districts. Organized by the NHL staff of the National Park Service Philadelphia Support Office, the conference hoped to bring the stewards together to encourage collaboration of these significant sites.

The outcome was astounding. Though separated into four distinct discussion groups, stewards came to realize that while they had certain needs specific to their property types, they had